

Benjamin Harris House (Mountain Grove)
Route 717
Esmont vicinity
Albemarle County
Virginia

HABS No. VA-1081

HABS
VA,
2 - ESM.V,
1 -

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

HABS
VA
2-ESM.V,
1-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BENJAMIN HARRIS HOUSE (MOUNTAIN GROVE)

HABS No VA-1081

Location: Route 717, Esmont Vicinity, Albemarle County,
Virginia.

Present Owner: Mrs. Melva W. Lawrence, Charlottesville,
Virginia.

Present Use: Part-time Residence.

Present Condition: Fair.

Significance:

This house is virtually unaltered since its construction in the early nineteenth century. Although now somewhat deteriorated, the exterior remains sound, and almost all of the interior woodwork is intact, some with original marbelizing.

A prime example of Jeffersonian-Federal style, Mountain Grove is designed on an elaborate proportional scheme.¹

¹The name Mountain Grove appears in a book concerning the Civil War careers of two of the original owner's grandsons.

Edwards, John E. The Confederate Soldier; being a Memorial Sketch of George N. and Bushrod W. Harris. New York: Blelock and Co., 1868.

Chain of Title

Location of Records: Albemarle County Courthouse, Charlottesville, Virginia.

Wilson Carey Nicholas and Margaret his wife to Benjamin Harris, 1062 acres on the Green Mountain. Indenture dated December 26, 1803; recorded July 6, 1804 in Deed Book 14 page 482. Nicholas financed the purchase price for Harris on December 27, 1803 in an indenture recorded in Deed Book 14 page 477.

Benjamin Harris to Mary Woods Harris. In a Will dated February 4, 1832; Harris left the plantation whereon he lived to his wife for the remainder of her natural life. Thereafter to be divided equally between sons George W. Harris and Bushrod W. Harris. Recorded July 7, 1834 in Will Book 11-page 467.

Mary W. Harris to George W. Harris. In her Will dated August 7, 1844; Mrs. Harris left to her son George her pension money together with all other property of every kind (except for negroe slaves left to daughter Jane). Recorded July 7, 1845 in Will Book 17 page 47.

Memorandum of an agreement between the children and legaltees of George W. Harris. Since George W. Harris died intestate, his children made an agreement in which they assumed the debts of his estate and provided for their mother's dower. The dower of Martha M. Harris included that portion of the land on which the residence was situated. Upon her death the dower land (with the exception of forty acres) was to be inherited by Isabella C. Harris or Arabella C. Harris. Recorded June 2, 1877 in Deed Book 72 page 70.

Arabella C. Harris to Melville C. Harris. In her Will dated May 4, 1908; Arabella gave to Melville, her brother, all property belonging to her, both real and personal. Entered into court September 12, 1921 and recorded in Will Book 33 page 153.

Executor of Melville C. Harris Estate to Arthur H. Lloyd and Ollie E. Lawrence. The Will of Melville C. Harris directed that "the Harris Homestead built by my grandfather George W. Harris sic be given to the Centenary Church, Methodist Episcopal Church South." (Will Book 35 page 10) If the church did not want the property, Harris directed his executors to sell the house and give the proceeds to the church with the stipulation that they be applied to the pastor's salary. The house and 391 1/10 acres were sold to Arthur H. Lloyd and Ollie E. Lawrence as recorded July 12, 1932 in Deed Book 216 page 581.

Arthur H. Lloyd to Ollie E. Lawrence. The widow of Arthur H. Lloyd sold her half interest to Ollie E. Lawrence according to a deed of November 3, 1941. Deed Book 252 page 184.

Ollie E. Lawrence to Melva W. Lawrence. Ollie E. Lawrence died in 1977 and left all his property to his wife. Will Book 52 page 512. The transfer of the Harris House to her is recorded in Deed Book 557 page 146. The acreage is listed as 382.2.

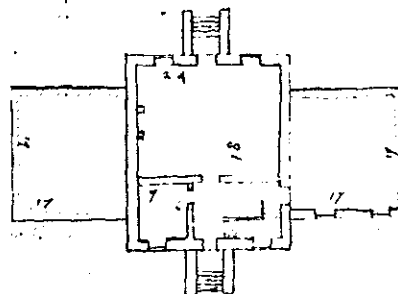
PART TWO

Architectural Documentation

Location of Records: Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.
Alderman Library, Charlottesville, Virginia.

The identity of the architect or designer is unknown and likewise there are no records of the builder or construction process extant. Mutual Assurance Society Records list no policies for Benjamin Harris. Stylistic and physical evidence indicate that the house was built soon after Harris bought the property in 1803, while personal property tax records list a dwelling valued at \$3000.00 by 1815. None of the original exposed wood in the house has circular saw marks, rather, the floor beams were hewn and then cut with a straight bladed saw. Original milled pine flooring in the house is tongue and grooved and smoothly finished on both sides. The entrance door brass box lock has oval knobs pierced by a bolt, a type commonly found on houses of the eighteenth century. The only visible nails used in construction are wrought iron finish nails used to fasten exterior and interior trim. All structural timber is mortised and tenoned and pegged.

An unidentified sketch done by Thomas Jefferson in pencil on graph paper, shows the plan of a brick house which strongly resembles that of the Harris House (Fiske Kimball 119; F.D. Nichols 26). The tripartite plans are similar although the room proportions differ.



Architectural Description

The Benjamin Harris House is stylistically similar to many houses built in the late eighteenth century in Virginia and North Carolina. Nearby examples of the high pedimented center pavilion flanked by lower symmetrical wings whose gables are at right angles to the center roof are Oak Lawn in Charlottesville and Bel Air in Nelson County. Marcus Whiffen, although probably not aware of the Harris House, discussed the same parti in the Semple House, in his book, The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg. Whiffen noted the possible inspiration of a plate of a triparti house in Robert Morris's Select Architecture, but he suggests that such a development could have evolved naturally out of the Palladian tradition and that a number of eighteenth century designers may have arrived at this parti independently of each other.

One striking element of the design of the Harris House is the unmistakable use of the Golden Section Rectangle as a system of proportion. Designers in the Georgian and Federal periods frequently used geometric proportioning to produce regulating lines, but it has not been believed that the Golden Section was consciously used by designers until later in the nineteenth century. Here however, the designer plainly used the proportion $\phi = 1.625$ to generate the site plan, and continue to use that ratio in establishing the dimensions of the house. The size of the plantation quadrangle is 248 feet square, in an unpublished study done at the University of Virginia in the spring of 1982, this approximate size is repeated in the quadrangles of nearby plantations in Albemarle County of the same era. The intent seems to have been to establish a man-made order on a large tract of unsettled land. Benjamin Harris amassed nearly 5,000 acres prior to the War of 1812, and it may be that the family cemetery and a mill operated by Harris are included in the ordering system, as well as plantation buildings no longer extant.

Architectural Survey**Exterior:**

The stone foundation is of a quartzite conglomerate laid in a coursed rubble pattern. This stone is found in a 3/4 mile wide band running southwest along the western side of the Green Mountain range. The stone stopped at the original grade level and red brick walls laid in three course American bond were carried up to the roof. A molded brick watertable defines the first floor level. Rubbed brick were used to define and decorate exterior corners. The mortar joints still have evidence of penciling. Heavy timber frames with architrave molding support exterior openings with the exception of the timbers at the cellar doors, which have a simple beaded edge. The cellar doors originally were sheltered by some type of bulkhead entrance which are no longer extant. One brick course above original grade are ten grilled openings for cellar ventilation placed directly below the windows of the upper storeys. Each grill has a rowlock header above. There are no signs that these grills were ever shuttered or glazed. First floor windows are doublehung with nine over nine sash. The upper sash is fixed in the frame. None of the doublehung sash now on the house is original. The southwest entrance doors are twins with three panels each. Above them is a transom with false elliptical muntins between the actual rectangular muntins. The transom bar is decorated with carved fluted molding. The southeast door is a single six-panel door with features similar to the previous one. Second floor windows of the central pavilion are nine over six double hung sash. The upper sash is again fixed. Windows in the half-storeys of the flanking wings are inward opening casement sash which appear to be original. Above the casement windows are a rowlock brick course. Above the doors and double hung windows are plaster jack arches. The pedimented southwest gable of the center pavilion has a round window placed above the center point. The sash of this window is no longer extant.

and does not appear in a 1932 photograph of the house. Gables of the lower wings have simple shake boards, as does the northeast gable of the center pavilion. All eaves have boxed cornices with scroll dentil blocks at approximately one foot on center. The roofing material is slate, in lieu of flashing the slate is let into its intersections with brick walls and brick chimneys. The ridge is capped by slates overlapping away from the north west direction. The flanking lower wings have interior end chimneys with corbelled caps. The northeast wall of the center pavilion has an exterior end chimney whose corbelled cap is pulled away from its intersection with the roof which forms a separate piece which may be more easily maintained and with less chance of causing a fire.

Interior:

Cellars. There are two cellars, one is entered through a door on the southeast wall of a wing, the other at a door adjacent to the center pavilion's chimney.

General Information: Floors - clay

Walls - unfinished brick, stone below

Ceiling - exposed floor joists and flooring

The first mentioned cellar is the area beneath the lower wings and a connecting space below the front hall of the center pavilion. Both wings have a fireplace whose opening is spanned by a stone lintel above which is a single course segmental arch in brick. Initials are inscribed on the interior wall of the southeast wing. Hardware on the door frame of the north west wing suggests that it once supported a door, but there is no corresponding trace of hardware on the door frame of the south east wing. The second cellar is below the large room of the central pavilion and is similar to first cellar in all respects except that it has no fireplace, a lower ceiling height and a wider entrance door.

First Floor.**General Information:** Floors - heart pine

Walls - paneled wainscot, chair rail below; plaster above

Ceiling - plaster

Door and Window Mold - architrave ; Doors - six panelled

Base - attic base

Chair rail - pedestal cap

Wood Finish - grained or marbled (some varnished over)

Plaster Finish - painted

Features

Center Hall. Quarter turn with winders stair, open stringer decorated with scrolled brackets. The newel post is positioned so as to anchor the winders, and from that corner continues up with two balusters per tread.

Large Center Room . Elaborately carved mantle and over mantle. Rope mold around fireplace opening, herringbone lattice work in thin strips of wood below mantle. Similar to plate 52 in William Pain's Builder's Pocket Treasure.

North-west Room. Simpler mantle and over-mantle than in previous room, and may have been marbled and stippled in the same manner, but has been varnished over with a dark stain. Glazed cabinets flank the fireplace, with wood panelled doors below the level of the chair rail.

South-east Room. Scrolled brackets support the mantel, which has a punch and dentil band . A quarter turn-with-winders stair leads up to a separate bedroom, stair details are similar to the one in the center hall. The floor and portions of the mantle in this room were damaged by fire and have been replaced.

Second Floor.**General Information:** Floors - heart pine

Walls - plaster with chair rail

Ceiling - plaster

Base - beaded

Doors - six panelled

Hall. Molded railing continues from first floor and encloses the stair well.

Center Bedroom. Simple mantle with architrave molding. Original brick hearth has been covered and fireplace opening has been blocked.

Northwest Bedroom. Simple mantle similar to the previous one but at a smaller scale. The fireplace opening is spanned by a segmental arch, brick with a

plaster face. Ceiling is at eight feet height at chimney breast, but slopes in order to conform to the roof.

South-east Bedroom. Exactly the same as the above mentioned except for a wood partition which encloses the stair well. The former bedroom, had a three-riser stair to accommodate the change in floor level between the center pavilion and the wings.

Alterations and additions.

A porch was added to the southeast wing in the late nineteenth century, and is visible in a 1932 photograph of the house. Its slate roof matched that of the original house, but it was constructed entirely of wood and did not alter much of the original fabric. It has since been enclosed to contain a kitchen and bathroom. A frame bulkhead has been constructed above the northeast cellar entrance.

Outbuildings.

A smokehouse and a kitchen are in ruins near the house . Having lost their roofs they are quickly deteriorating.

Bibliography

Scholfield, P. H. . The Theory of Proportion in Architecture. Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1958.

Whiffen, Marcus. The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg. Williamsburg:
Colonial Williamsburg, 1960.

Interviews

Mrs. Melva W. Lawrence, owner. Charlottesville, Virginia.

Mr. John D. Marr, Jr. , geologist. Virginia Division of Mineral Resources.

Benjamin Harris House (Mountain Grove)
HABS No. VA-1081

Project Information

This project was undertaken by the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia, under the direction of K. Edward Lay, Professor of Architecture, during the Spring Semester, 1982. The documentation was prepared by John J. Bernard, Jr., Graduate Student in Architectural History, and was donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey. It was not produced under HABS supervision, nor edited by members of HABS staff.